

Against the Grain

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Look How Far We've Come: Changing Technical Services Workflows

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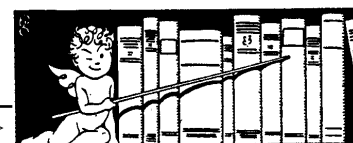
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Against the Grain

"Linking Publishers, Vendors and Librarians"

Look How Far We've Come: Changing Technical Services Workflows

by **Kristen DeVoe** (Electronic Resources Librarian, College of Charleston) <devoek@cofc.edu>



If one was to look through the back issues of *Against the Grain*, going all the way back to the beginning of the journal in 1989, he or she would get a pretty good idea of how technical services have changed over the years. As the years progressed, technology became a more and more pervasive theme in the journal as librarians wrote about how to incorporate these new resources and technologies into the workplace. For instance, an issue in 1993 has a column discussing the ins and outs of email, but the majority of the columns and articles addressed concerns dealing with printed materials. Electronic resources were mentioned of course, but were not at the forefront of discussion. As the years progressed electronic resources and emerging technologies made their way into the columns and articles of *Against the Grain* until they became the main focus with print out of the limelight. From looking through a stack of recent issues I have in my desk, I can see just how much electronic resources and technology have affected technical services. Recently there have been issues on eBooks, electronic resources pricing models, metadata, digitization projects, and more.

How has the increase in electronic resources and new technology in technical services affected the workflow of those departments? Surely technical services departments have had to quickly adapt their workflows as new things come along. In many ways, the library is a different animal than it once was and the old ways of managing technical services are not effective for the new formats, technology, and user demands. Jobs have changed, department functions are different, and the resources themselves have changed.

For this issue of *Against the Grain*, we have collected eight articles that discuss the complications, solutions, and new workflows for technical services that develop as a result of the increase in technological solutions and electronic resources that have occurred in recent years. **Nathan Rupp** and **Liisa Mobley** have contributed an article that thoroughly examines the use of technology in the e-resources workflow and provide examples of one workflow from **Cornell University Libraries**. **Barbara Pope** has written on the future of serials collections in the academic library and examines how electronic resources

have changed the serials workflow. **Melanie Feltner-Reichert** and **Marielle Veve** crafted an excellent article on the process of integrating non-MARC metadata into a technical services department. **Susan Mueller** offers us a comparison of technical services workflows between two similar academic libraries. Her analysis of the similarities, differences, and outcomes is an example of how there are so many different ways to perform functions in technical services today. **Martin L. Knott**, **Doreen R. Bradley**, **Deborah S. DeGeorge**, and **Jim Ottaviani** have contributed an article on their experience with examining feedback from users of the **Library's OPAC** on the extent of the bibliographic and classification information provided in the catalog and assessing their current workflows in light of the

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If Rumors Were Horses

Just learned that the awesomely energetic **Barbara Schader** <bbschader@ucr.edu> has a new job. She is Assistant University Librarian for Collections and Scholarly Communication at **University of California, Riverside**. As we all know, **Barbara** was previously at **Cal Poly San Luis Obispo**. And before that she was Head of Collection Development at the **UCLA Biomedical Library** for ten years. She says she is very excited about her new position and the many fascinating opportunities. Congratulations, **Barbara**. We will look forward to seeing **Barbara** in Charleston in November.



Keri Paulson (President of **EBL**) <kari.paulson@ebooks.com> tells us that the new hire for **EBL** in the US is **Sally TerBeck** who will be joining **EBL** in mid-October. **Sally** is currently with **Blackwell Book Services** and managed the technical integration of **EBL** titles into **Collection Manager** and the rollout with the sales team. **Sally** will be based in Portland, OR. www.ebllib.com

Heard from one of my favorite people **Bob Miranda** <cogcomm@aol.com>. Remember when he used to work for **Robert Maxwell** and **Pergamon**? Anyway, recently there was a party in New York celebrating **Bob's** fifteen years with **Cognizant Communications**, the publishing company

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Reference Services, Scalability, and the Starfish Problem

by **Rick Anderson** (Associate Director for Scholarly Resources & Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah; Phone: 801-587-9989) <rick.anderson@utah.edu>

Here's a familiar inspirational story: A man is walking on the beach, and discovers thousands of starfish, stranded and dying above the waterline. There are far more than he can possibly hope to rescue on his own, but he begins, implacably, to pick them up one at a time and throw them as far as he can back into the water.

Soon another man comes along and sees what he's doing. He watches for a while and then says, "You know, there are too many of them. It's not going to make any difference."

The first man looks down at the starfish in his hand and responds, "It makes a difference to this one."

The moral of the story is that even if our individual efforts can't change everything, they can change something, and each of us can make a great difference to other individuals who need our help.

It's a wonderful analogy, but it depends for its power on one important but unspoken assumption: the man in the story is a volunteer, helping starfish on his own time. If he were employed by the state to solve the problem of starfish getting stranded on the beach, and he were going about his assignment by throwing them back one by one, then the story wouldn't be an illustration of praiseworthy altruism. It would be an illustration of incompetence, and the man should be fired.

One of the dangerous things about being a librarian is the opportunity it gives us to help people. I realize that sounds crazy, so let me explain: This morning I was on my way to a meeting. As I hurried down the hall, I noticed a student looking confused and sort of wandering in a circle near the book stacks. Although I was running a little bit late, I couldn't stand to pass her by without offering some help, so I asked if she needed a hand. It turned out that she was having a hard time figuring out the call number she had written down — she was confused by the decimal places, and had ended up in the wrong section of shelving. ("These numbers are so confusing," she muttered at one point.) It took us a few minutes to get everything straightened out, but I finally got her to the right place and she found her book and thanked me profusely.

I continued on to my meeting with a spring in my step. I had really helped someone, and she had really appreciated it, and life was good. But the man with the starfish kept coming into my mind and making me feel uneasy.

Why? Because one major area of traditional librarianship — reference service — is built on a fundamentally flawed model, and it's a model that reinforces itself by making us feel good when we implement it. We sit at desks and encounter patrons

in the stacks, and we interact with our users one-on-one. Most of those interactions are quick and shallow, and amount to directional help, and the more such interactions we have with patrons the more uneasy we get. If you spend an hour telling people where the bathrooms are, you're inevitably going to start asking yourself uncomfortable questions about whether your time is being well spent. But then a patron approaches with a deep and involved research problem, and he draws on your expertise in gratifying ways, and sometimes the help you give makes a very large (maybe even a life-changing) impact. You feel wonderful after these experiences. "This is what librarianship is all about!" you say to herself. And so you continue doing it, and you get better and better at it, and you train others to do it well also.

And the more we do it, the better we feel, and the less inclined we are to address the bigger, more intractable problem: the fact that this model of patron service leaves the vast majority of our patrons unserved. The calculus is cruel but undeniable: fifteen minutes spent by one librarian helping one patron gives a miserable return on the money spent by the librarian's employer — an investment that is intended to help thousands and thousands of patrons. For every library user that comes to our reference desks or tugs on our sleeves in the stacks, there are hundreds or even thousands who have similar needs and never get any help at all. I know for a fact that this bothers many of us, but I don't think it bothers most of us nearly as much as it should.

To me, what felt like the key moment in my interaction with a library patron this morning was the moment that she found the book and thanked me effusively. I had helped her find her book! She was thrilled! Both of us were happy! And if I had been a volunteer looking for a way to be of help to someone, I'd be absolutely right to feel wonderful about what I'd done. But I'm not a volunteer, and I wasn't investing my own time. I'm being paid to help 28,000 students, and I was investing my employer's time.

Should I have declined to help her? Of course not. But it's important to think clearly about the significance of our interaction. The key moment did not come when we found the book and she thanked me for all my fine help. Rather, it came when she muttered "These numbers are so confusing." The crux of her problem lay in the fact that LC call numbers look like gibberish to most normal people, and that libraries themselves are still, despite our ongoing efforts, very difficult to use. I'd be willing to bet money that a very large number of the 28,000 students my library serves find LC call numbers just as confusing as she did,

and I can promise you that most of them will never have the kind of interaction with a librarian that she had with me. This isn't because we librarians aren't willing to have those conversations, or aren't good at having those conversations, but simply because there are too many of them and too few of us. In an academic or large public library, traditional reference service is simply not scalable to the size of the patron population that needs our help.

Again: am I suggesting that we stop offering one-on-one service to our patrons? Absolutely not. As long as patrons keep coming to our reference desks, there need to be people there waiting to help them. But in the short run, I believe we need to think long and hard about how that kind of service should fit into our libraries' structures, and what we're going to do about the fact that it's available to so few of the people we serve. In the long run, we should be trying to put our reference desks out of business. We need to design our services so that they serve ALL of our patrons well — not just the small minority of patrons we are able to interact with one-on-one. To some degree we do this already when we shift print resources to online, and when we provide online help, and when we figure out ways to make access more intuitive so that patrons can get what they need without having to find someone to help them.

But I think we can (and must) do more. We need to radically rethink the catalog, and make it simpler — less exhaustively complete, less painstakingly accurate, more timely and more user-friendly — so that patrons actually need less help. We need to embrace federated searching, and figure out ways to make it much better than the current state of the art. We should take a very hardheaded look at how time is spent on reference desks, especially by highly-paid, expensively-trained librarians. How many patrons does a librarian actually get to help in a typical hour of desk time? Couldn't that hour be more fruitfully spent in front of a class somewhere else on campus, or consulting with a professor or a department head on ways to better integrate library services with the curriculum? If the vast majority of questions fielded at a reference desk are directional or otherwise routine, doesn't it make sense to staff the desk with less expensive and less expert personnel, who can refer patrons to librarians as needed? Please note that none of this is to question the value of reference librarians — on the contrary, it's the very high value of reference librarians that makes me question traditional reference service. In other words, what I'm questioning is whether we're using reference librarians the right way and whether our patrons are getting the tremendous benefits that reference librarians can offer.

The root of my patron's problem lay in the fact that the library is hard to use. I helped her find a book, but I didn't solve her problem — even if it seemed to both of us like I did. The problem with traditional reference service is that it isn't scalable, and the solution to that problem does not lie in improving or expanding reference service, but rather in making traditional reference service less necessary. If only it didn't feel so good to provide traditional reference services, we might be more motivated to try harder to put our desks out of business.

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information found. **Hope Barton, Michael Wright, and Randy Roeder** have written an article examining technical services planning in the electronic environment and how to keep a streamlined workflow in light of so many changes. **Carol Ou and Gwen Gregory** have written on how their library is repurposing MARC records to improve their online databases Webpages. Finally **Leslie Burke and Stephanie McConnell** give us a look at the "Four Rs of Adapting to New Technology" in technical services departments.